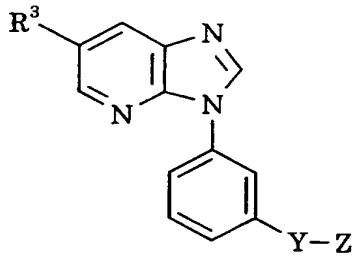
CLAIMS:

1. A compound of formula I, or a salt or prodrug thereof:



(I)

wherein

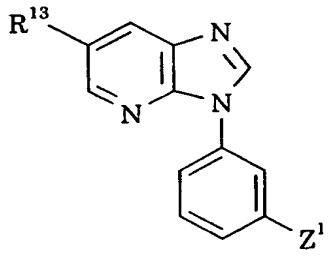
Y represents a chemical bond, or a methylene (CH_2), carbonyl (C=O), thiocarbonyl (C=S) or amide (CONH or NHCO) linkage;

Z represents an optionally substituted aryl, heteroaryl or heteroaryl(C_{1-6})alkyl group, or a group of formula $-NR^1R^2$;

R^1 and R^2 independently represent hydrogen, hydrocarbon or a heterocyclic group; or R^1 and R^2, together with the intervening nitrogen atom, represent an optionally substituted heterocyclic ring selected from azetidinyl, pyrrolidinyl, piperidinyl, piperazinyl, morpholinyl and thiomorpholinyl; and

R^3 represents aryl or heteroaryl, either of which groups may be optionally substituted.

2. A compound as claimed in claim 1 represented by formula II, and salts and prodrugs thereof:



(II)

wherein

Z^1 represents an optionally substituted aryl or heteroaryl group; and

R^{13} represents phenyl, furyl or isoxazolyl.

3. A compound as claimed in claim 2 wherein Z^1 represents cyanophenyl, formylphenyl, acetylphenyl, pyridinyl, cyano-thienyl or imidazolyl.

4. A compound as claimed in claim 2 or claim 3 wherein R^{13} represents phenyl or furyl.

5. A compound selected from:

6-(furan-3-yl)-3-[3-(pyridin-3-yl)phenyl]-3*H*-imidazo[4,5-*b*]pyridine;

1-[3-(6-(furan-3-yl)-3*H*-imidazo[4,5-*b*]pyridin-3-yl)phenyl]pyrrolidin-2-one;

6-(furan-3-yl)-3-[3-(imidazol-1-yl)phenyl]-3*H*-imidazo[4,5-*b*]pyridine;

6-(furan-3-yl)-3-[3-(morpholin-4-ylmethyl)phenyl]-3*H*-imidazo[4,5-*b*]pyridine;

6-phenyl-3-[3-(pyridin-3-yl)phenyl]-3*H*-imidazo[4,5-*b*]pyridine;

and salts and prodrugs thereof.

6. A compound selected from:

1-[3'-(6-(furan-3-yl)imidazo[4,5-*b*]pyridin-3-yl)biphenyl-2-yl]ethanone;

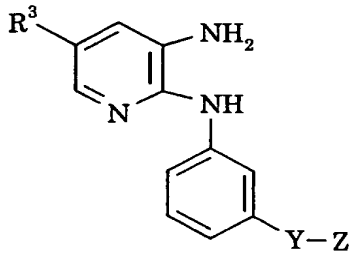
3′-[6-(furan-3-yl)imidazo[4,5-*b*]pyridin-3-yl]biphenyl-2-carbaldehyde;
3′-[6-(furan-3-yl)imidazo[4,5-*b*]pyridin-3-yl]biphenyl-2-carbonitrile;
3-[3-(6-(furan-3-yl)imidazo[4,5-*b*]pyridin-3-yl)phenyl]thiophene-2-carbonitrile;
and salts and prodrugs thereof.

7. A pharmaceutical composition comprising a compound of formula I as defined in claim 1 or a pharmaceutically acceptable salt thereof or a prodrug thereof in association with a pharmaceutically acceptable carrier.

8. The use of a compound of formula I as defined in claim 1 or a pharmaceutically acceptable salt thereof or a prodrug thereof for the manufacture of a medicament for the treatment and/or prevention of anxiety.

9. A process for the preparation of a compound as claimed in claim 1, which comprises:

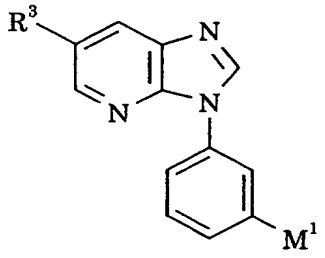
(A) reacting a compound of formula III:



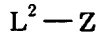
(III)

wherein Y, Z and R^3 are as defined in claim 1; with formic acid; or

(B) reacting a compound of formula VI with a compound of formula VII:



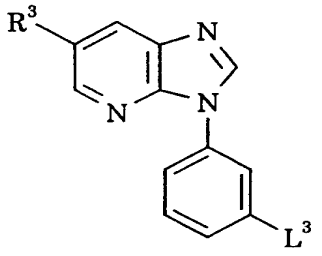
(VI)



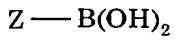
(VII)

wherein Z and R^3 are as defined in claim 1, L^2 represents a suitable leaving group, and M^1 represents a boronic acid moiety $-B(OH)_2$ or a cyclic ester thereof formed with an organic diol; in the presence of a transition metal catalyst; or

(C) reacting a compound of formula VIII with a compound of formula IX:



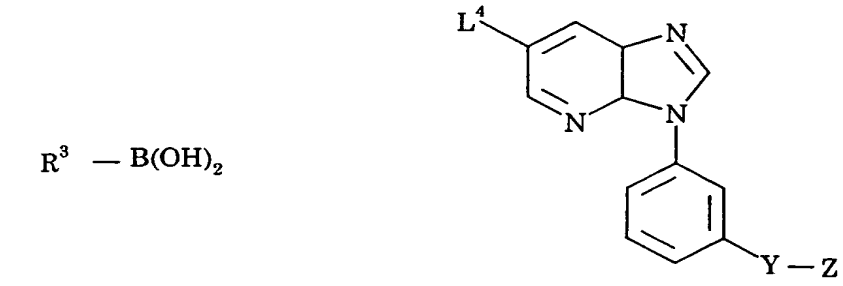
(VIII)



(IX)

wherein Z and R^3 are as defined in claim 1, and L^3 represents a suitable leaving group; in the presence of a transition metal catalyst; or

(D) reacting a compound of formula X with a compound of formula XI:



(X) (XI)

wherein Y, Z and R^3 are as defined in claim 1, and L^4 represents a suitable leaving group; in the presence of a transition metal catalyst; and

(E) if desired, converting a compound of formula I initially obtained into a further compound of formula I by standard methods.

10. A method for the treatment and/or prevention of anxiety which comprises administering to a patient in need of such treatment an effective amount of a compound of formula I as defined in claim 1 or a pharmaceutically acceptable salt thereof or a prodrug thereof.